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Princeton University

Entry details

Entry Name:	Campus Dining at the Center for Jewish Life
Institution Name:	Princeton University
Entry Completed By (<i>name and position</i>):	Donna Pilenza, Director of Residential Dining; John Messina, Director of Operations; Chad Rovner, Chef de Cuisine at the Center for Jewish Life

On March 16, 2025, the new Mandelbaum Family Dining Pavilion, located inside Princeton University’s Center for Jewish Life (CJL), opened its doors to the campus community. This renovation reflects both the evolution of kosher dining at Princeton and the deep historical roots of the CJL. In early 2020, alumnus David Mandelbaum ’57 and his wife, Karen Mandelbaum, committed a transformational gift to renovate and expand the CJL’s kosher kitchen and serving areas. The planning phase focused on modernizing aging infrastructure, improving workflow efficiency, increasing production capacity, and creating a space that supports daily dining and cultural programming.

Essay:

The renovation of the Mandelbaum Family Dining Pavilion reflects both the evolution of kosher dining at Princeton University and the deep historical roots of the Center for Jewish Life (CJL). In early 2020, alumnus David Mandelbaum ’57 and his wife, Karen Mandelbaum, committed a transformational gift to renovate and expand the CJL’s kosher kitchen and serving areas.

The planning phase focused on modernizing aging infrastructure, improving workflow efficiency, increasing production capacity, and creating a space that supported both daily dining and large-scale cultural programming while reinforcing a sense of belonging.

The newly renovated space modernized and enhanced the community dining experience, reimagined the kitchen, and significantly improved the operational efficiency which resulted in increased sustainability efforts, improved cost savings, and a greater adherence to kosher law with the creation of three fully separate kitchens for meat, dairy, and parve (foods which are neither meat nor dairy). The renovation also allowed for the opportunity to revise the dining hall's culinary style and expand its menus with feedback from students as well as incorporated staff input in the planning process.

Introduction:

The marketing and launch of the Mandelbaum Family Dining Pavilion centered on celebrating its dual role as a modern dining facility and a symbol of Jewish life, inclusion, and community at Princeton University. Communications emphasized the Pavilion as both a transformed physical space and a meaningful continuation of more than a century of Jewish presence on campus.

Essay:

Communicating to the community before the renovations commenced as well as for the re-opening were key factors for the successful launch of the Pavilion.

Key messaging highlighted the Pavilion's naming in honor of David Mandelbaum's parents, Philip and Ella Mandelbaum, and the significance of the Mandelbaum family's multi-generational connection to Princeton. The narrative framed the renovation as more than an infrastructure project, positioning it as a community investment that strengthens connection, tradition, and belonging.

Response to the launch was overwhelmingly positive. Students, faculty, and staff shared hundreds of written notes and messages expressing appreciation for both the transformed space and the care taken throughout the renovation process. The launch successfully reinforced the Pavilion as a vibrant, welcoming hub that supports both nourishment and connection.

Introduction:

The success of the Mandelbaum Family Dining Pavilion renovation was the result of extensive cross-campus collaboration, reflecting a shared commitment to excellence, inclusion, and service to the Princeton community. This project brought together diverse stakeholders, including Princeton Campus Dining, the Center for Jewish Life (CJL), Hillel staff, The Jewish Center of Princeton, Capital Projects, the Office of Advancement, architects, culinary teams, student representatives, and the Mandelbaum family.

Essay:

From early planning through execution, collaboration ensured alignment between operational needs, donor vision, cultural representation, and student experience. CJL administrators and students partnered to curate the Pavilion's signature art wall, incorporating visual storytelling through photographs, modern artwork, recipes, and ingredients that celebrate Jewish identity and community expression.

Operational continuity during construction required particularly complex coordination. Campus Dining worked closely with CJL and kosher certification partners to locate and operate a temporary off-site kosher kitchen, ensuring meals were prepared under strict standards and transported daily to campus. This effort preserved consistent service to students throughout the renovation period and reinforced trust within the community.

The dedication and reopening activities further demonstrated institutional partnership. The event brought together CJL leadership, University administrators, alumni, faculty, staff, and students, showcasing campus-wide commitment to the Pavilion's mission. Speeches from University leadership emphasized the space as a powerful statement of belonging, inclusion, and shared purpose.

The Mandelbaum Family Dining Pavilion stands as a model of how strategic collaboration can create a space that elevates dining excellence while nurturing community, heritage, and connection.

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